Slim Carlson

By Miki & Julie Collins

On a mid-winter day when the sun creeps along the southern horizon, Denali casts a shadow that stretches from Wickersham Wall 50 miles north to Lake Minchumina, and west to the Herron River and east to the McKinley River. The country blanketed by this shadow was Slim Carlson's country for 50 years, long enough for the lanky, blue-eyed Swede to become a legend.

Born Hjalmar Carlson in 1886, Slim left Sweden for Boston in 1906 to escape the draft. In 1918, after working on the Alaska Railroad, he took a dog team over Anderson Pass to the Muldrow Glacier and the McKinley River, hoping to find Kantishna gold. Over the next few summers he prospected the foothills, staking up to 22 claims before shifting his efforts toward trapping.

Slim ranged along the Clearwater and Carlson Creek. He traveled over to the Foraker River and may have been the first person to cross the pass between Straightaway and Peters Glaciers. He started to climb Denali by the Muldrow route, reaching about 16,000 feet. Then, "I decided, my goodness, what the dickens, I got nothing up there. Why should I go up there?" Around 1924, pressured by park rangers, Slim retreated north of the park. Purchasing rights to a trapline from Gus Johnson, he spent the rest of his life trapping between the Foraker and McKinley Rivers, first working upper Birch Creek near the boundary and then moving to fresh country down by Castle Rocks. He later shifted headquarters to Slippery Creek to avoid the terrible winter overflow on Birch Creek. In the 1930s he moved to lower Birch Creek, and later to Lake Minchumina, for better water transportation (probably because the winter mail trail closed).

Until airplanes became readily available, Slim traveled to Nenana once or twice a year for supplies, first by dog team and later by boat. On his first trip, he mushed the route now followed by the Denali Park Road. Later he followed the Nenana-Kantishna trail and then the Nenana-McGrath mail trail. In the 1940s, Slim began taking advantage of airplanes. Supplies could be flown directly to Minchumina, and starting in 1949 local pilots flew fish to Slippery Creek for him almost every winter.

In the early years, though, he couldn't afford much, just flour, sugar, salt, and coffee, he mostly lived off the land. He harvested caribou, sheep, and moose, and was especially fond of black bear tallow. Small game, including porcupine, beaver, grouse, and ptarmigan offered some variety. He found good salmon runs along Birch Creek and located his lower Birch Creek cabin near Hot

Slough because of the good fishing. Berries were often bountiful, including crowberries, raspberries, currants, and especially blueberries and cranberries. In the lean years, Slim made clothes from caribou and moose hide, mukluks from the skin of moose hocks, and sleeping bags from caribou or sheep. He cut grass for dog bedding and whipsawed his own lumber, spruce for furniture and stretching boards, and birch for dogsleds.

The remote life didn't bother Slim, although he enjoyed company. He loved his dogs and talked with them a lot. He said it took brains to get bushy, "and I didn't have that." Slim tried working for wages at Eureka Creek in Kantishna. He later took Slim Avery as a partner. He disliked both experiences and after that he lived on his own. "Oh, I vould have took a long-haired partner, of course, but this vas kind of hard to find!"

When he needed cash, Slim used to sell game and bear tallow to miners at Kantishna and other camps. After moving to Lake Minchumina he built or helped build cabins for locals including the Holmeses and Collinses. He told author Jim Rearden in 1955 that he needed \$2,500 a year to break even.

The first few years of winter trapping, Slim prospected in the summer, or took contract work in Nenana cutting firewood or driving horses. Later, he spent his summers gardening, cutting firewood, building sleds, picking berries, and working on trails and line cabins. During freezeup he harvested fish -- mostly salmon at Birch Creek, and later whitefish at Minchumina. In the winter, he trapped primarily marten, but also wolves, wolverine, lynx, fox, mink, beaver, and otter. He sold the pelts and often used the meat for his dogs or himself. He eventually maintained over 200 miles of trail, trapping alternate areas to ensure healthy fur populations.

Slim became legendary for his strength and his ability to build tight log cabins. Using hand tools, he constructed over two dozen cabins: first at McKinley River, then Clearwater, and later in the Birch Creek-Slippery Creek area. In the early 1950s, he was maintaining 15 trapline cabins spaced 6 to 15 miles apart. Without modern plastic sheeting and wood preservatives, cabins rotted out quickly; at some locations Slim built several cabins consecutively. Most were small line cabins, roughly 7x9 feet and too low for his 6'1" frame. His bigger home cabins usually had a root cellar, garden, cache, and doghouses.

In his 5 decades of wilderness life, Slim had adventures with moose, bear, and wolves, overflow, bad ice, floods, treacherous muskeg, cabin fires, bitter cold, terrible snow conditions, and near starvation. He once shoveled through snow to find cranberries. When a grizzly began scavenging a moose Slim had killed, he turned his dogs onto the bear. While they made war, Slim erected a 12-

foot cache to elevate the meat above the bear's reach. Although he trapped for a living, he loved animals and killed them only when necessary.

Slim's isolated life could be severe. His feet froze several times, once during a desperate retreat following a line campfire. When a frozen toe turned black, he carefully whittled it off to prevent gangrene. In the early 1950s, he accidentally chopped his left thumb clean off. He staunched the bleeding and protected the raw wound with a leather guard until it healed.

After the mail trail closed it became hard to make the required January trip to Nenana to sign his alien card (he kept his Sweden citizenship). After Minchumina got regular mail flights, Slim went there instead and eventually locals persuaded the solitary old-timer to move there. He occupied a cabin originally built by a fur-farmer named MacDonald, next to the Holek fur farm currently owned by the Collins family. After a cabin fire in the 1960s, Slim built a new 18x24 cabin. In the seventh decade of his life, he lifted and fitted the massive logs single-handedly, accepting help only with the ridgepoles.

Slim continued traveling to his trapline by boat or on foot with his dogs each summer, staying through the winter season, until he was in his mid-80s. Declining fur prices and advancing age limited his subsistence harvest as well as his income, and he sold the northern part of his trapline to make ends meet. In 1974 his health failed and he died at the Fairbanks Pioneer's Home in 1975, shortly before his big country became engulfed by ANILCA's enlarged Denali Park.

Dick and Florence Collins buried his ashes at Lonely Lake, near his beloved Slippery Creek home. He left his few possessions to the Collins family and the children rebuilt his trapline, buying back the areas he'd sold. Slim had cared well for his country; fur was still abundant, and with the trapline whole again his legacy was complete.